

CHAPTER 2, LAW 7(B) - THE POWER OF THE HUMAN EYE, PART I

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

...Neither should a person be overly greedy (lit., 'one of a wide soul'), obsessed with the pursuit of riches, nor one lazy and neglectful of work. Rather he should be one with a good eye, [of] little work and [who instead] 'works' in Torah study. And the little which he does acquire (lit., 'which is his portion') he should be happy with.

The Rambam is continuing to list different qualities, recommending that we follow the middle path in all our ways.

This week the Rambam discusses our attitude towards earning money, how we must be neither too greedy and materialistic, nor too lazy. As one point of introduction, I feel the mere fact that the Rambam discusses our attitude towards work in these laws is telling. We would tend to think how hard one works is not so much an ethical matter, relating to one's character traits. It is more a religious issue: How should one divide his time between his occupation and Torah study. I would have more expected to find such a law in the Rambam's next section -- the Laws of Torah Study. (See in fact there Ch. 3, Laws 9-11.)

In truth, however, the Rambam rightly sees imbalances in our working habits as stemming from character flaws. As we'll see below, with the wrong overall attitude a person is liable to work way too much or too little, depending how he responds to the emotional challenge of earning a living.

What struck me most when reading this law is the Rambam's interjection of a good eye. Rather than working too much or too little, writes the Rambam, one should have a good eye and only work the necessary amount. At first blush it seemed an unexpected turn of phrase. I would have expected the Rambam to advise us along the lines of being satisfied with our lot and realizing G-d provides us with that which we truly need.

Furthermore, a good eye would seem to refer to how one looks upon others -- meaning, a person who is not jealous of others and their successes. That would perhaps be an appropriate solution to overworking if the only reason we overwork is to keep up with the Joneses. But in my humble opinion this simply isn't true. Most workaholics fall in love with their careers for their own sakes. They seek fulfillment and/or prestige by building their businesses, conducting their research, rising in their positions, or just doing what they do best.

Alternatively, a person can fall in love with money for its own sake -- not only because **they** have more, but because of an inherent drive for riches. As King Solomon puts it, "One who love money will not be sated with money" (Ecclesiastes 5:9). It's an open-ended drive. If so, how can the Rambam recommend a good eye as the solution to overworking (and certainly for underworking (if that's a word))?. Isn't man's drive for money far more sinister and far more complex?

I believe there is a fascinating insight here, which is based upon a deeper understanding of the concept of a good eye. We read in the Book of Ruth how Ruth, the righteous Moabite convert, accompanies her aged and impoverished mother-in-law Naomi to the Land of Israel. Upon their arrival, she goes out to the fields to collect from the gleanings left for the poor in order to support her mother-in-law and herself. She is then met by Boaz, relative of Naomi, who offers that she glean exclusively in his fields. (He later instructs his workers to specially leave gleanings behind for her.) He also instructs her to keep her eyes on his field, following behind the reapers (2:9).

The commentary "Iggeres Shmuel" (by R. Shmuel de Uzeda, a Kabbalist and preacher of 16th-century Safed and Constantinople) explains that Boaz specifically wanted so righteous a person to lay her eyes on his field, because her "good eye" would cause a blessing to descend upon it. King Solomon states, "One with a good eye will be blessed" (Proverbs 22:9) -- which the Talmud understands to additionally imply a good eye will bring blessing (see Sotah 38b). What is the idea behind this?

There is another passage in the Talmud which I believe sheds light on this. The Talmud (Bava Metsiah 42a) writes that one who is going to measure his store of grain may pray to G-d that his grain "increase". He may not, however, do so once he has already measured it, for a blessing only descends on that which is hidden from the eye.

The simple idea of this is that when something is hidden from view, G-d can just as easily make 20 bushels into 30 bushels. Thus, we have the right to pray that G-d make our supply of grain magically and miraculously increase -- for such miracles are as effortless to G-d as the Laws of Nature themselves. After we have counted our store, however, we may not ask G-d for such, since He does not lightly perform open miracles in the world.

I have, however, my doubts if this truly is the meaning of the Talmud. Does G-d play around with nature as soon as our backs are turned? Would He perform an open, albeit unobserved, miracle at the slightest human prayer (not, of course, that human prayer is so slight). Perhaps -- and it certainly isn't "difficult" for G-d to do so. But I don't particularly get that impression from many other statements of the Sages. The Mishna (Brachos 9:3) states that if one's wife is pregnant and he prays that she have a boy it is a "wasteful" prayer -- since there is no way to change that which is already determined. Evidently, G-d would not perform such a miracle lightly even with our prayers -- even though, of course, the embryo and its gender are hidden from sight.

Even more fundamentally, the Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 5:5) states that at creation G-d made a

"condition" with certain objects that they would defy their natures at predetermined times in the future. G-d thus made an explicit "agreement" with the Red Sea that it would split for Israel, with the sun and moon that they would stand still for Joshua (see Joshua 10), with fire that it would not consume Chananya, Misha'ail and Azariah (Daniel 3), etc. G-d thus does not take the Laws of Nature lightly. Such overrides can and do occur, but nature is not so casually cast aside by the G-d who set it in motion.

Based on the above, I believe that there is actually a far more profound concept at play here. As we'll see G-d willing next time, the key lies in understanding the true power of the human eye.

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